

INVESTING IN LUNENBURG COUNTY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Lunenburg County residents believe the county's **most important assets** are its natural beauty, quality and pace of life, proximity to Halifax and its people—their friendliness as well as their talents and skills.
- The people who live in Lunenburg County communities want to see their **populations grow and diversify**, and their **infrastructure and economies grow and diversity** without losing what makes them special already—their **small-town character and charm**.
- Residents want to see greater investment and development in **health and wellness**, imagined broadly to include not just doctors and emergency rooms, but alternative health practitioners as well. They also want to see investment and growth in **green technology**.
- Lunenburg County residents want to see more development in **arts, culture and entertainment**—perhaps best summed up as ‘things to see and do’ for all ages.
- Residents recognize that Lunenburg County is a tourist destination, but they are keen to see development that benefits residents and tourists alike, year-round. Key areas for this type of development are **arts, culture and entertainment** (music venues and festivals, e.g.) and **recreation** (e.g. one suggestion for an affordable, public, no-frills sauna / spa complex such as those found across the Nordic countries).
- Residents want development in independent, **unique, niche businesses** across the county, and they want to see **businesses work together** to help one another thrive.
- Some Lunenburg County businesses are doing innovative, collaborative things, but more could be done. People with experience in business emphasized the need for a **third-party facilitator** as it is difficult for business people to do this work ‘side of desk,’ competition sometimes deters collaboration, and volunteers are burnt out.
- People who live in Lunenburg County can find most of the goods and services they need inside the county, but most often leave their communities or the county (or both) to go to a **specialist medical appointment; shop for furniture and major home appliances; attend public concerts, plays or art shows; shop for specialty food items; and shop for clothing**. These are potential areas where a business could fill a niche in the County.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an online survey of Lunenburg County residents conducted in November and December 2021, and a series of in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted during the same period. The objective of both was to ascertain what gaps people perceive in the amenities, products and services in the County, by asking what things they need and do in their communities, what things they have to leave their communities for, and how far they travel to satisfy their wants and needs. We also asked both groups directly what they love about living in Lunenburg County, what frustrates them, and how they would like Lunenburg's communities to develop in the future. The results are meant to inform the development of a new micro-lending initiative, as they show what residents believe are priority areas for investment.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PORTRAIT OF LUNENBURG COUNTY

Like other rural and small town areas of Nova Scotia, Lunenburg County is seeing an increase in population (since 2016) after decades of mostly year-over-year loss (see Appendix I for more detail). This population growth stems from new people moving to the area, rather than being born in it. Those who move to the area are predominantly immigrants moving to Canada from another country and landing in Lunenburg County; the rest are migrants from other parts of the province and country.

As Appendix 1 details, just over 1500 Lunenburg County residents report that they work in Halifax; another 415 work in Queen's County. The majority of the rest of the working population works in Lunenburg County. Inside the county, the employment rate of the core-age workforce (aged 25-54) is the same as the provincial average, just shy of 80%. Workers in Lunenburg County are twice as likely as workers in the rest of the province to be employed in manufacturing (and within that sector, 4.8 times more intensive in rubber manufacturing and 3 times more intensive in wood manufacturing) and almost three times as likely to be employed in logging and forestry. A full list of sectors and occupations where Lunenburg County residents are disproportionately employed can be found in Appendix 1.

Turning to the income derived from work, Lunenburg County ranks rather poorly compared to other census divisions in Nova Scotia. The median household income in 2015 in Lunenburg county ranked 10th among the 18 census divisions in the province. There is more detail about who lives in Lunenburg County, where they work, and what they earn, with comparison to the rest of Nova Scotia, in Appendix I. But these basic details give a sense of the socio-economic backdrop to the rest of this report.

METHODOLOGY AND PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

We begin by describing the three components of this project—the interviews and the survey—and describe the processes and participants separately. Following the methodological section, however, we combine insights from the survey and interviews and structure the report according to themes rather than mode of data collection.

Interviews

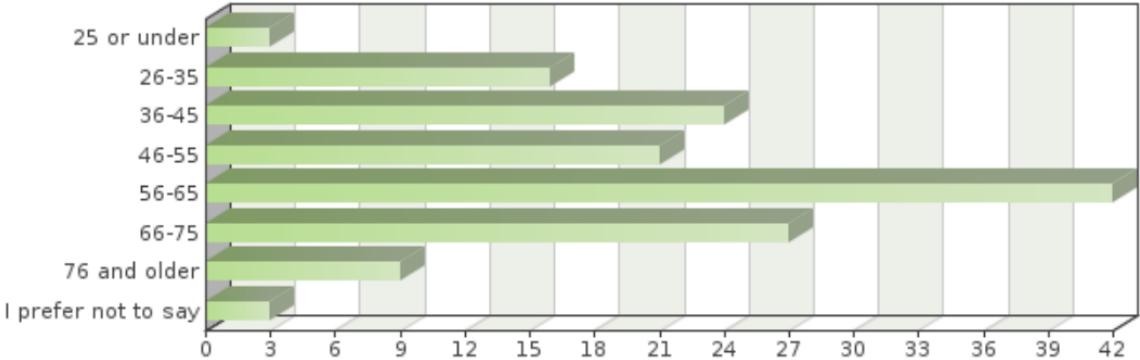
Seventeen Lunenburg County residents participated in a telephone interview. They were recommended by NOW Lunenburg County, a grassroots organization with strong ties to the communities and recruited via a follow-up email or phone call from the researchers. Interviews typically lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, and followed a semi-structured script of questions that covered the themes noted above—the good and bad of living in Lunenburg County, shopping and other habits, observations of the business and political environment, and desires for the future. Each interview was transcribed and analysed (coded) twice by two researchers to identify common themes.

Interviewees ranged in age from their twenties to over seventy, and there were nine men and eight women. They represent a variety of roles in the community, from elected officials to business owners to stay-at-home parents, and most are engaged in volunteer work in the county. There is a mix of self-employed, employed and retired interviewees, and most have lived some of their lives outside Lunenburg County. Most live in one of the larger population centres in the County—Lunenburg, Mahone Bay, Chester or Bridgewater—but some live in the smaller communities. Their identities are not shared in the analysis below, but we may note some details about each person when they are quoted, to contextualize their observations.

Survey

The survey, consisting of around thirty questions, was conducted entirely online. Respondents were recruited on social media and through NOW and the Community Foundation of Nova Scotia’s email newsletters. The survey’s questions were developed on the basis of findings and themes arising from the first several qualitative interviews. Considering the sampling strategy (online recruitment) and mode (online survey), and the demographics of Lunenburg County (older), the final sample for the survey is quite good. There is a range of ages, with respondents most likely to be in their mid-50s to mid-60s, but sizeable proportions of younger and older people.

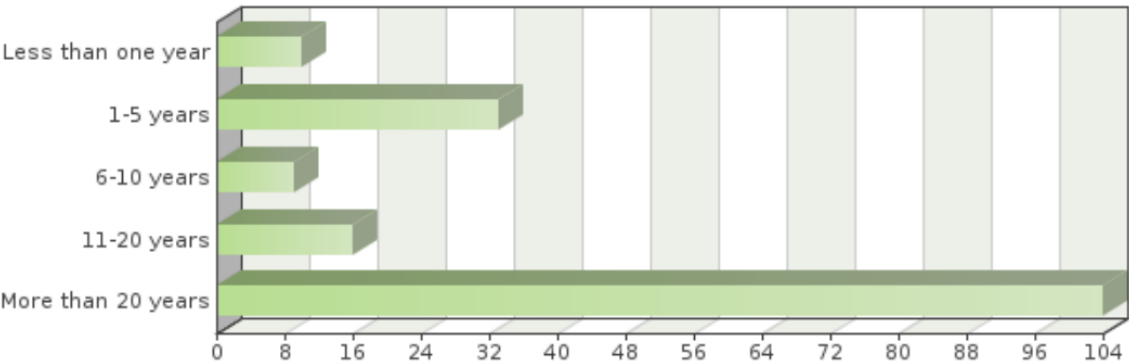
What is your age? (N=145)



Looking at gender, the sample is less diverse: 113 women completed the survey, compared to only 26 men and 3 who identify as non-binary. It is common in voluntary survey research with no gender quotas for women to be overrepresented in samples. The gender imbalance is likely further enhanced in this survey as it focuses on household shopping, and women continue to perform the bulk of this across societies around the world.

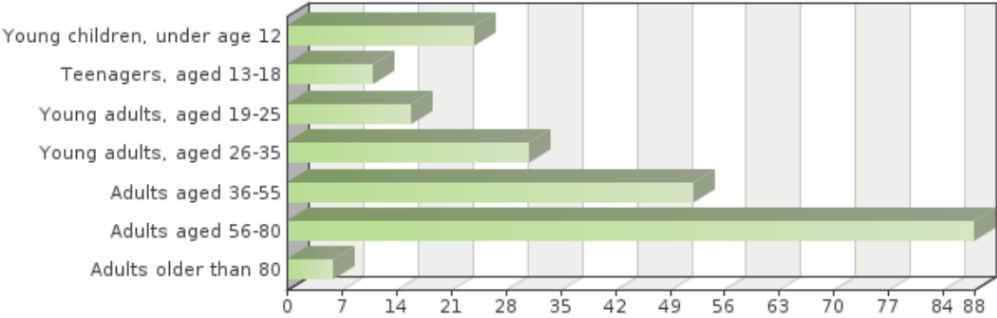
The fact that respondents are clustered in the middle age categories means that most have lived in Lunenburg County for a long time. The most common selection was “more than 20 years”.

How long have you lived in Lunenburg County? (N=172)



Most respondents live in a household of two (just over half) or live alone (approx. one in five).

Including yourself, who lives in your household full time? (N=162)



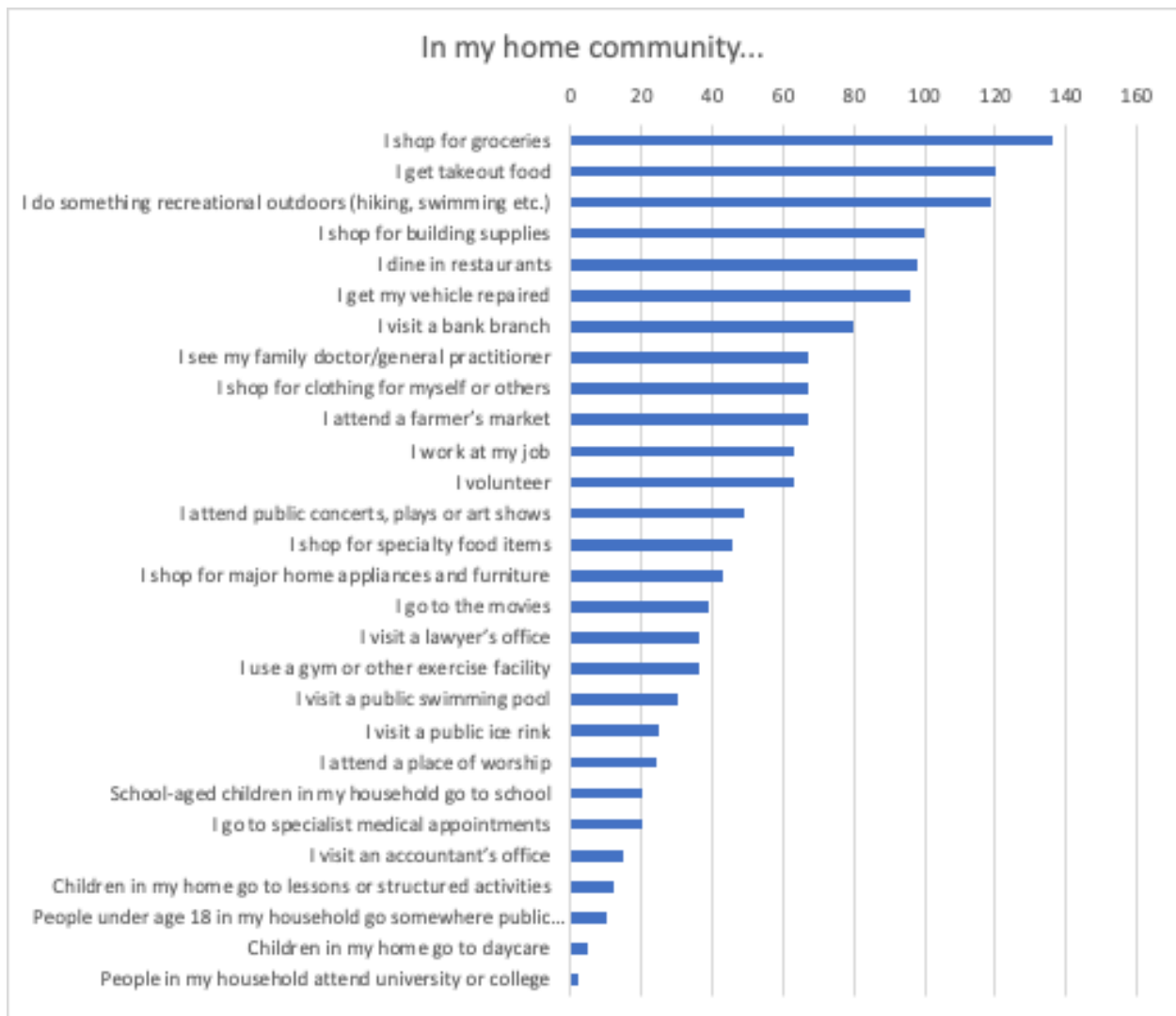
The survey asked respondents to select their community from a long list of every named community in the County. It reached respondents all over Lunenburg County, with sizeable proportions, as might be expected, in Bridgewater, Lunenburg and Mahone Bay, and smaller but still noteworthy groups in Blockhouse and New Germany. Other communities (e.g. Barrs Corner,

Conquerall Mills, Riverport) are represented by five respondents or fewer. People define their communities in different ways. Some residents of Lunenburg town might consider Blockhouse as part of their community at certain times. Some residents of Broad Cove might think of the entire stretch from Petite Riviere to Cherry Hill as their community. But when considering the next questions, respondents were asked to keep their *specific* community—the one they selected in the “community” question—in mind. Later in the survey, to avoid confusion, they were asked what other Lunenburg County communities they visit most often. The most common answers, by far, were Lunenburg, Bridgewater and Mahone Bay, with Chester following close behind.

FINDINGS

Where do Lunenburg County Residents find what they want and need?

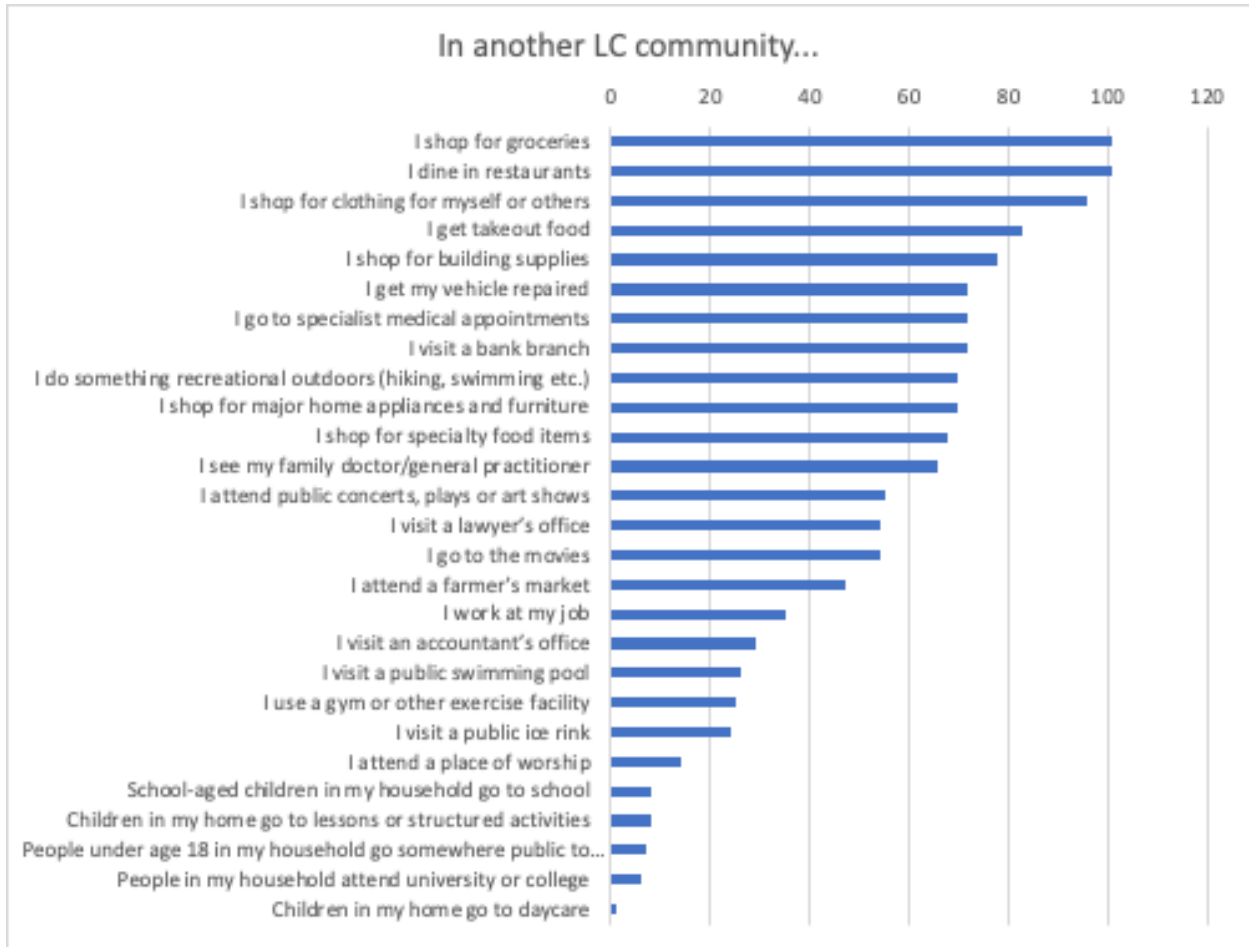
People were able to find a wide range of goods, services, amenities and activities in their home communities. Bearing in mind that the sample has large proportions in the highly populated and relatively amenity-rich areas of Bridgewater, Mahone Bay and Lunenburg (town), **most respondents said they could get groceries, take-out and dine-in food, building supplies, outdoor recreation, and auto repair in their home communities.** Less than half work a paid job in their home communities. Less than half say they shop for clothing in their home communities.



*Due to formatting constraints, one item is incomplete: the complete item is “people under age 18 in my household go somewhere public to ‘hang out’”.

Some of the results above are unsurprising—amenities and institutions that only exist in small numbers across the whole province—such as universities, movie theatres, ice rinks and pools—are not available in many respondents’ home communities. Some results have more to do with

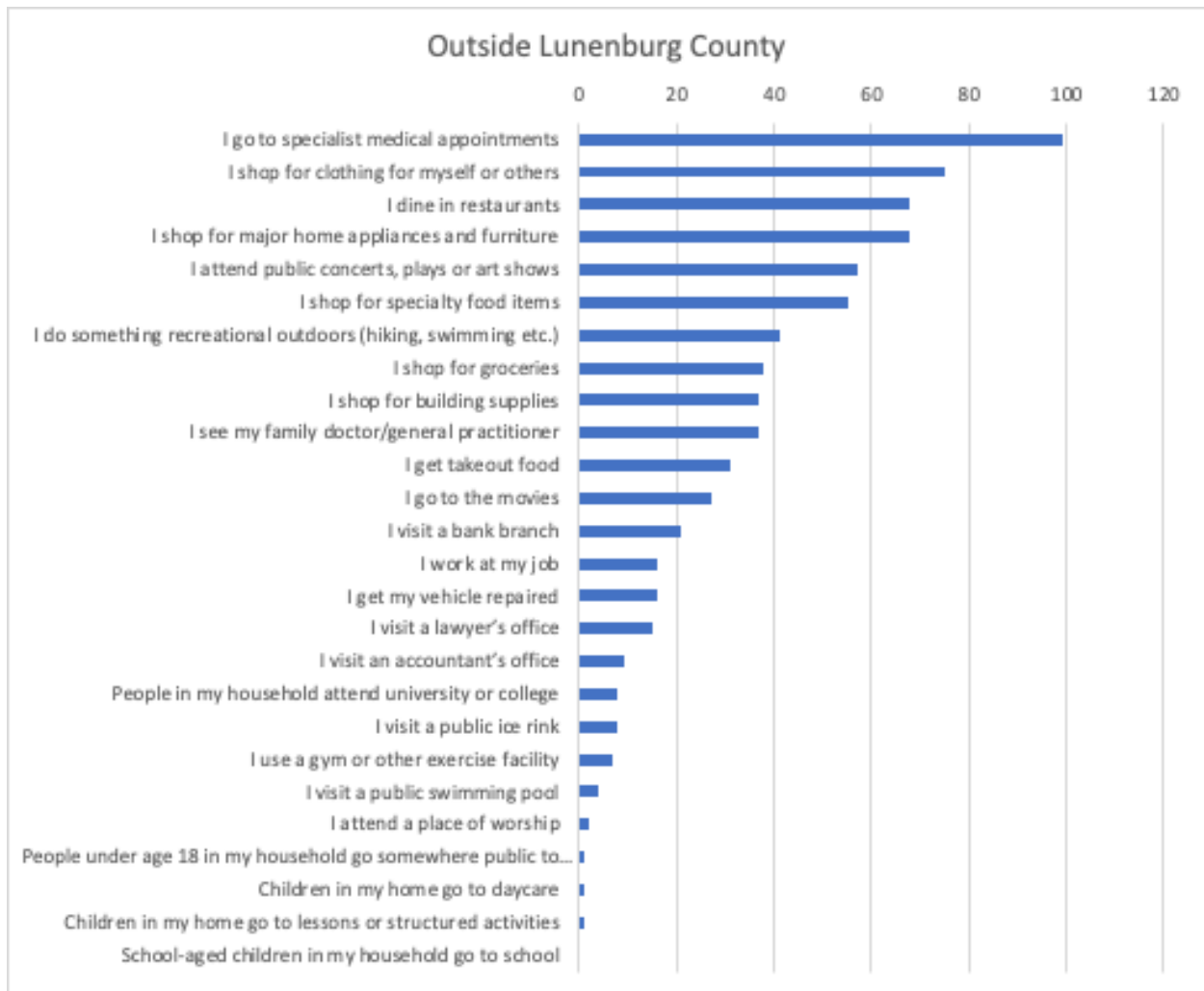
the sample of people we reached, such as the low prevalence of daycares and other children’s activities, which partly stems from the fact that only 35 of the people surveyed here have children under 18 living in their household (yet still might reflect a lack of local options). But some stand out: people under the age of 18 may not have a *public* place to hang out in many of the communities surveyed here.



Respondents are able to access a greater diversity of amenities in other communities in Lunenburg County. The top things they leave their home community for, but stay in Lunenburg County, are groceries, restaurants, clothing, and building supplies. Children’s activities are still very low on the list of prevalence, and while this partly stems from the fact that only 35 people in the sample live with children or teenagers, the **results still point to a dearth of options (structured activities, places to hang out) for children in the County.**

Residents were most likely to say they leave Lunenburg County entirely for specialist medical appointments, restaurants and to shop for clothing, furniture and major home appliances, to attend public concerts or shows, and to shop for specialty food items. Very small numbers

selected activities for children, suggesting that children who do not have structured things to do outside the home are not leaving their communities or the county to find them.



Another way to visualize this data is to look at the responses for community, county and beyond side-by-side to highlight where the prevalence of activities is significant, and grows as we get further from the local community. This table is included as Appendix 2, but here it is worth noting that five areas stand out: **substantially more people need to leave their communities or the county (or both) to go to a specialist medical appointment; shop for furniture and major home appliances; attend public concerts, plays or art shows; shop for specialty food items; and shop for clothing.**

The interview data point to similar findings, but add some interesting nuance. Health care certainly factors in as important to County residents, but two areas that are prominent in the survey get more space and detail here: arts and culture, and 'niche', locally-owned businesses. To summarize across several interviews, participants noted that Halifax, only around an hour

away, was where they went for “concerts and dinner theatres [and] performances” as well as “niche” stores (e.g. outdoor stores, clothing and shoes, furniture), and many could live with this. The county’s proximity to Halifax, in fact, came up as an asset for residents in many interviews. However, most still wished they could experience more arts and culture, and find a wider variety of independent, unique, niche stores, closer to home.

The survey specifically asked if respondents lived with anyone who required special supports for a disability. Sixteen respondents did, and of those, 2 said they could not get disability-related supports when they need them, and four said they rarely could. The rest said they usually or always could.

Survey respondents were asked in an open-ended question to say what they “routinely” need to leave Lunenburg County to get. The most common answers were doctors and specialists, niche stores and services (guitar repair, certain ethnic foods), and better prices and selection on clothing, major appliances and building supplies. Similarly, when asked what frustrates them about living in Lunenburg County, the top answer was a lack of doctors, specialists and healthcare in general. They also noted a perception that the communities and different groups in them didn’t work very well together. Other common answers included a lack of reliable internet and cell service, a lack of public transportation, and limited ‘things to do’ for people of all ages.

Asked what they love about living in Lunenburg County, most people in the survey and interviews pointed to nature, openness and scenery or friendly people. Much of what people like is tied up in a sense of what makes rural or small-town life different: a slower pace of life, safety, peace and quiet, friendliness, and proximity to nature. The interview responses, again, add some nuance to these general survey findings. For interviewees, the ‘friendliness’ of Lunenburg County is actually code for something more akin to what sociologists call “**social capital**”—the connections between and among people, the networks that link people, their skills, their resources, and talents together, and facilitate collaboration and coordination. One interviewee said that “access to really interesting people” was one of the best things about his community; another said “you can build relationships [...] more easily than maybe you could in a larger city.” One interviewee told a story that highlights what many thought was distinctive about the social connections in Lunenburg County:

“...when you go out here, when I walk around our community, I know everybody for various reasons. Whether you actually stop to talk to them or not is a different factor, but it's just because of the relationship you might have with them. Maybe it's just a hi, but you know who they are. Yeah, some you stop and have that chat. But when you go visit my friends in [US state], they don't even know their neighbours. You know, the first time I went to their house, [...] I was unpacking the car and their neighbour pulled in and [...] I talked to him for a while. And I went in and said, ‘I was just talking to so-and-so.’ [They said,] ‘who's that?’ [And I said,] ‘The guy right next door that I could reach out the window here and touch him!’ And I knew more about him in a 15 minute conversation I had with him than what they had the first couple months they lived there. Wow. Oh, it's just it's a different world here. Like you just get to know [everybody] and everybody here cares about everybody. That my actions that I take, affect others. Whereas when you go to some of these bigger

centres or areas of the world, it's all about me, me, me, and I don't worry about my actions and anybody else and what their effect is.”

While this interviewee’s characterization of life in Lunenburg County probably doesn’t ring true for everyone—after all, every society has insiders and outsiders, inequalities and marginalization—it was a common theme across most interviews. This is even the case in interviews where people also acknowledged that Lunenburg can *seem* friendly, but actually be quite closed off to newcomers. Nevertheless, in social scientific research, the connections that *do* exist and are apparent to residents are seen as the tissue that makes collective action and community change possible.

Business-to-Business

One specific facet of social relationships and social capital that got more attention in the interviews was Business-to-Business (B2B) collaboration. Unlike the survey, the interview included a question about this, and interviewees were generally well-poised to answer because of their roles in the community.

Overall, the perception is that businesses within the county sometimes, but do not always, work together. Importantly, several interviewees linked this business-to-business question with the relationships between the communities in Lunenburg County, not just the businesses. While there were isolated examples of businesses and communities working together on shared goals, most interviewees felt that more could and should be done to collaborate. For one interviewee, the lack of collaboration in some areas was “the biggest frustration.” In his view, speaking at the community-level, “no matter where somebody sets up a business or tries to grow something, it should be good for all of us.” One other participant with decades of experience in manufacturing and business consulting recalled a time when he attended a meeting of the local Chambers of Commerce. He left with the impression “they were all fighting to cut the same little piece of pie up.”

“And if they had just met and said, ‘Okay, why don't we all work together, we could actually get something done as a community as a county,’ we would have been so much further ahead. But as it was, they were they were basically cutting each other's throat, just to get ahead.”

Some saw this replicated at the level of businesses. According to one business owner, “there's a bit of an attitude that if you create a business, too much like another that already exists, that now you're competition and now you're going to really hurt each other. And that's frankly just not the case.” Another long-time resident recalled that when the Lunenburg County Lifestyle Centre was built, they released a request for proposals for office furnishings, and rather than collaborate to make a bid, local suppliers who could not supply 100% of the request simply did not make a proposal.

Asked to reflect on why businesses did not work together as much as they should, interviewees offered a number of explanations. They tended to come back to this same idea that businesses had difficulty seeing how collaboration could benefit them all, and saw it instead as a way to lose money or time. One said:

“I think that businesses don't necessarily see opportunities of collaboration as opportunities for growth. They see similar businesses as a competitor. So when you may have, you know, workforce limitations, so you may not have the skilled labour that you need. And you see a competitor in the same, you know, same sector. My thinking is 'hmm, well, hey, why don't you pull your resources and maybe you can put, you know, bids on larger pieces of work and share the work' as opposed to not putting a bid on it because you don't have the capacity to fulfil that. So they see their like-businesses as competitors, as opposed to a network where they could collaborate, where they could share, you know, best practices or, you know, learn from one another to figure out how not to do something that would be detrimental to their business.”

One interviewee who had worked in community economic development recalled an example from a specific initiative that sought a small contribution from local businesses. “All they could see was how much money they were going to spend, even though most of them weren't spending it, it was actually their landlord. But the businesses just couldn't understand you. They just saw money going out of their pocketbook, potentially, and couldn't see the like, collaborative lens of working together, which was so frustrating.”

Across interviews, one key takeaway emerged—a possible way to help businesses see the benefits of collaboration: there should be a third party facilitating new collaborative efforts. As one interviewee put it, “there's no shortage of good ideas. There's the capacity to implement them [...] Someone has to take the baton to actually make some of those things happen. And it's not like, you know, it's not an hour job. It's like, weeks, months, years' worth of work that you have ahead of you. [And] having an expectation of a volunteer, who has the skill set to actually make some of those things happen is non-existent, like you have to pay people well with the skill sets to make some of those things happen. But like, who's gonna pay for that?” Other interviewees concurred that it is not completely up to businesses to “figure it out.”

Fortunately, many interviewees pointed to areas where businesses *were* collaborating. One noted the way local breweries partner with local restaurants to their mutual benefit. One interviewee with knowledge of manufacturing knew that some were collaborating and partnering on recruitment and training. Others perceived obvious easy opportunities for new partnerships and business-to-business collaboration. One pointed out the discrepancies in the hours of downtown Bridgewater businesses, and wondered why they wouldn't agree on common hours to create a unified shopping district. Another felt that restaurants could work together on procuring supplies from local suppliers. They also felt that the size of “organisations like Michelin” opened up opportunities for more local procurement and for the development of local producers to make the inputs Michelin needs. Another interviewee with experience in the arts and culture sector thought a “United Lunenburg County Tourism plan would be kind of cool.”

What do Lunenburg County residents want? Diversity, Collaboration, and Investment in the Foundations of Local Life

The survey asked what possibilities respondents saw for their county and communities in future. There are clear themes in the responses. **First, people want to see the cultural diversity of their communities increase.** They want to see new immigrants from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds, and they want them to feel comfortable and welcome. This desire goes hand-in-hand with a desire for increased access to certain cultural and ethnic foods in the county. Disappointingly, the survey elicited a small handful of explicitly racist, xenophobic comments from residents who did not like that the county's white majority was shrinking. But these comments came from two respondents whose views, thankfully, are vastly outweighed by those of respondents and residents who welcome the new faces and ideas coming to the county.

Second, they want to see the county grow without losing what makes it special—so they see the best avenues for growth as being through investment in a diversity of local businesses, institutions and infrastructure, and growth in housing (including affordable housing) that is in keeping with the character and norms of the county. Many, thanks in part to experience of the past two years, believed that the normalization of remote work (working from home) had opened up rural living to more and more people, so the potential for growth had increased. One younger interviewee who grew up in the area tied both of these first two themes—diversity and careful growth—together, remarking:

“One of the things that I would like to see change is increased diversity. And one could argue that by holding onto nostalgia [for the county's ‘character’] that kind of contradicts the diversity but I personally don't think it does. I think diversity increases opportunity for the marketplace, it creates social and economic opportunity, and I don't see why that would be a downside, in that sense.”

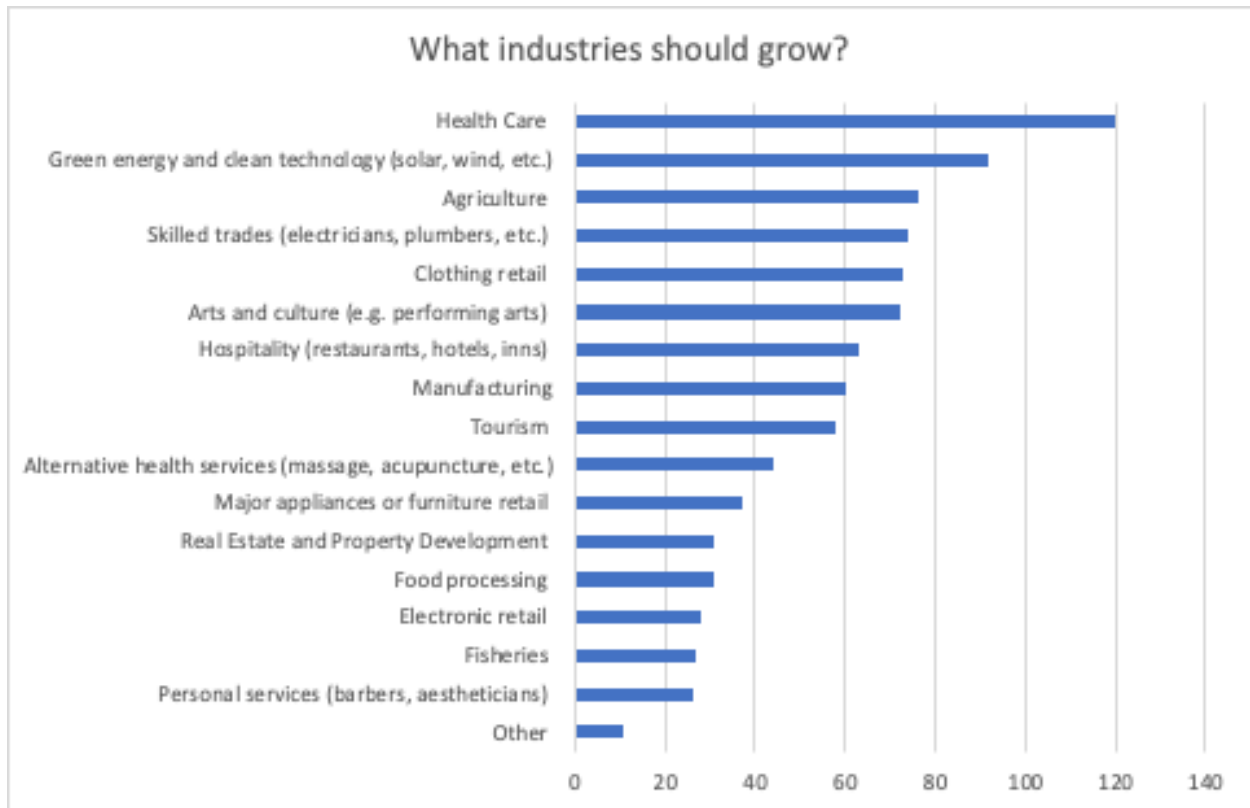
Third, respondents want to see investment in things that improve quality of life for residents, not just tourists, year round. Many had ideas for how to make winter more interesting in their communities, like saunas. Interviewees noted that the location and style of recreational facilities did not indicate much coordination among communities. Several observed that other places, such as Nordic countries, had smaller, cheaper recreation facilities scattered throughout communities rather than mega-plexes people need to drive to. Many wanted to see an expanded range of things to do, particularly in the area of live music and other cultural events. Others were concerned about the impact of short-term rentals on the housing market and affordability, and life in general in the county. Some believed seasonal residents helped the local economy, but others felt they took housing off market without really contributing to local politics, events and institutions. Many wanted improvements and better access to health care. One survey answer sums many of these themes up very well:

“Lunenburg County needs to evolve beyond being just a 4-6 month tourist destination. Keep things open in the winter and build community. Focus on keeping young people in the area. Provide year-round recreational opportunities for all ages, including aqua centres (popular

on Vancouver Island. They keep the older population fit and healthy during the long winter month [with] steam baths, saunas, pools etc. at recreation prices not \$60 a day). Even for the tourist, Lunenburg town is dead in the fall but it's one of the [best] looking towns in the country [and] there is a lot that can be done this time of year. Look to other parts of the country with similar demographics (Vancouver Island for example). [We need] more diversity in food and shopping options, more respect and representation for Black Nova Scotian and Indigenous communities in the area. More diverse cultural activities in general. Live music including jazz. More affordable recreational activities. Keep the bike shops open. I keep going to rent a bike when friends and family come to town and the shops are always closed. An independent cinema -- so many films shot in Lunenburg there should be a stronger theatre presence here. Somewhere for youth and younger generations to hang out that is not religious or recreational. And most certainly there must be reliable and affordable public transit and rent. Without both of these things the workers shortage will continue. [We have to] avoid seeing ourselves as just for tourists and not communities full of talent.”

The survey also asked respondents to select which, in a list of possible industries, they would like to see grow in Lunenburg County. Unsurprisingly—and perhaps un-excitingly to anyone expecting the ‘next big thing’ to come out on top—health care is the area where residents want to see growth. However, it is worth thinking about health holistically, as a product not only of doctors and hospitals, but also as something improved by access to recreation, and attention to socio-economic equality. Moreover, health care is followed closely by the exciting area of green and clean energy and technology. Two staples follow close behind: agriculture and skilled trades, followed by clothing retail and arts and culture. Alternative health services are further down the list, but if they are combined with more general ‘health care’, the health services category becomes unquestionably the dominant priority.

One perceived barrier to development emerged in the qualitative interviews, which warrants attention. Several survey respondents noted that the kind of development they would like to see might not work in a community with a small population. The sentiment was that there might not be enough demands from the local market to justify certain kinds of businesses. This perception has some truth to it, but the ‘markets of scale’ logic may also act as a conversation-ender when it does not need to. There may be opportunities to think outside the box about how to bring desired goods and services into a smaller community, through collaborative efforts between businesses and communities within the county.



The Way Forward

In the survey and interviews, there is a clear indication of where Lunenburg County residents want to see their communities go: toward diversity and growth, while maintaining their unique character and ways of life, and while prioritizing investments in year-round amenities that will improve the quality of life for residents, not just tourists. To get there, residents believe that the county's communities and businesses need to work together and coordinate growth and development in ways that benefit as many residents as possible. In some cases, this might mean consolidation of services, but in many—possibly more—it means situating a broad range of goods and services *in* communities to improve access. There is an undeniable emphasis on health care in this data, and when combined with other emergent themes such as outdoor recreation and nature, there is an interesting opportunity to imagine what a community invested in its own *holistic health* looks like. What is certain is that there is a core group of residents—bigger than those captured by this study—who care about the future of the county and are (and have been) willing to work with others to shepherd it. But they do need some coordination and support, as many are busy with their own livelihoods, and find it difficult to change the minds of people who mistake collaboration for competition. There is a need for a third party to help channel the energies and desires expressed in this survey and interviews toward the bright future Lunenburg Country residents believe it possible.